

Practitioner Guidance

Working with Uncooperative Families



Care
Protection
Commitment
to North Ayrshire's Children



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Purpose

This guidance has been produced by North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee to assist professionals working across agencies when dealing with hostile and /or uncooperative parents and carers when a child is subject to child protection registration or when there are child protection concerns.

The guidance will also assist staff from across agencies working with parents and carers who use hostile or avoidant behaviour.

The guidance will assist staff to identify where the actions of parents/carers who are Ambivalent, Uncooperative or Hostile, impact on child care/child protection issues.



Context


Protecting Children and Young People:
Framework for Standards, Standard 2.10 –

“Professionals take action to protect each child even when their parents pose a risk to workers. Agencies ensure there are systems and support mechanisms in place to maximise staff safety in such situations”

The nature of child protection work can at times result in parents and carers feeling angry and they can react in a hostile or threatening way towards professionals who are involved with their family.

The Bridge Childcare Development Service in their report (1997) into the death of Ricky Neave in 1994 recommended “when a parent is considered to be threatening or hostile any presumption that they are different with their children should be rigorously tested”.

The report further recommends that in such situations “recognition be given by managers to the impact on social workers and other staff of parental aggression and any fear that is aroused in them and the consequences for decision making and practice. Adequate professional supervision and support must be given in these situations”.



Employers have responsibilities to ensure the safety and well-being of employees under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 and the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992.

Principles

The welfare of the child is paramount. Their needs should remain at the centre of all child protection activity. All such activity should also be based on improving outcomes for children.

Inter-agency work in North Ayrshire serves a diverse population with differing needs. Professionals involved in child protection should adopt a positive and anti-discriminatory approach to parents and carers.

Effective communication and information sharing in child protection work is crucial and this includes the work undertaken with children, parents and carers.

Issues of confidentiality must not compromise the welfare and protection of children. This includes professionals sharing information about parents and carers who act in a hostile or threatening way towards workers and whose actions of uncooperative or ambivalent compliance result in the ineffective partnership working with agencies to promote and safeguard the wellbeing of children.

Definitions

For the purpose of this guidance the following broad definitions are being used:

Hostile and Threatening Behaviour – challenging behaviour which produces damaging effects, physically or emotionally, in other people.

Avoidant/Uncooperative Behaviour – involves proactively sabotaging efforts to effect change or, alternatively, passively disengaging.

Ambivalent / Ineffective Compliance– involves parent/carers not admitting to their lack of commitment to change but working subversively to undermine the process.



Recognition that there may be a problem

Hostile and Threatening Behaviour

This includes:

- violence
- physical, verbal or emotional aggression
- threatening or intimidating behaviour – intimidation can include using the complaints system against staff members.

The impact of such behaviour on individual staff will vary but fear of violence and aggression is recognised as impacting on judgements, interpretation and intervention.

Avoidant / Uncooperative Behaviour

This includes a wide range of deliberate behaviours and attitudes such as:

- passive non-compliance with plans of work
- failure to keep appointments
- refusal to allow access to the child or to the home
- re-directing the focus of concern away from the needs of children

When considering non-compliance and lack of co-operation by a parent or carer, professionals must consider if the child protection concerns have been explained clearly, taking into account issues of language, culture and disability so that parents or carers fully understand the concerns and the impact on their care and needs of the child.

Professionals must assess if all possible strategies have been tried to establish partnership working with the parent or carer e.g. a change of worker, use of a specialist agency where appropriate.

There should also be an assessment of the parent or carer's capacity to make the identified changes.

Ambivalent / Ineffective Compliance

'Beyond Blame' the 1993 study of fatal child abuse inquiries described 'disguised compliance' as apparent co-operation. Examples of this include:

- agreeing to keep appointments or to undertake individual actions but never actually carrying them out or putting little effort into making changes work.
- co-operating with some services but not making the important changes Indicators include no significant changes identified at reviews; alignment with certain professionals/services.
- change does occur but it as a result of the input of agencies and not as a result of the actions of the parent/carer.

As with unco-operative parents or carers, professionals must be sure that the child protection concerns, the areas of identified change and the expectations of the parent carer have been clearly communicated to the parents or carers.

An assessment of the parents or carers capacity to understand the concerns and issues and their ability to make changes should be undertaken.

In all cases workers must be aware that behaviours of parents or carers can be misinterpreted:

- for example what may appear as uncooperative behaviour may be designed to mask hidden issues in the family such as domestic violence, and drug and alcohol misuse. If professionals do not have a broader understanding of these issues and the impact on the child, they may operate at a lower level of expectation and the impact on the child may not be recognised.
- similarly, challenging behaviour in parents/carers can be a reflection of their high levels of anxiety, confusion and mistrust of professionals (sometimes due to their history with a particular service or due to their feelings of powerlessness). Open, honest and clear communication about the nature of the concern and of what is expected of the parents/carers, can go some way towards alleviating these underlying issues.



Assessment of Risk

Record keeping in relation to families must include full information on any instances of hostile, unco-operative or challenging behaviour by parents/carers. It is the responsibility of each professional, within their agency's guidelines, to ensure that such information is clearly and systematically recorded. The importance of this cannot be over emphasised.

Individual staff must inform their line manager timeously of any concerns they have with regard to parent or carers whom they have assessed as hostile, uncooperative or who use ineffective compliance.

Information collated with regard to parents or carers who are hostile/uncooperative or who use ineffective compliance must be considered together with child protection concerns to form the basis of initial and ongoing risk assessment.

Information with regard to such concerns about parent or carers must be communicated within and across agencies, using existing mechanisms such as review processes like core groups and review case conference.

In the absence of an established process, for example, where a child protection investigation is in very early stages, if a professional has concerns involving the behaviour of a parent/carer he/she must communicate these to other agencies. On the basis of this information sharing process across agencies, the professional with lead responsibility for the assessment must discuss with their line manager who will decide if an inter-agency meeting should be convened.

Such a meeting will be chaired by the agency with responsibility for the completion of the assessment. It will include all relevant professionals from agencies to whom the child and family are known – including adult services.

For Consideration - Meeting, Review, Visits

Any meeting or review will focus on the needs of the child but risk factors with regard to the parent or carer's behaviour should also be considered. Factors for consideration will include:

- information held by agencies with regard to the parent or carer – particularly regarding historical patterns of challenging behaviour.
- whether the parent or carer has a history of mental illness/disorder.

- whether the parent or carer has a medical condition which may result in a loss of self-control.
- whether there are issues for the parent or carer in relation to alcohol or substance misuse.
- current stress levels within the family and any known timescales for the alleviation of any stress factors.
- whether any particular professional will be perceived as a threat to the parent or carer.
- whether there are gender issues for consideration.
- any factors which will reduce the stress on the parent or carer and minimise the risk of aggression e.g. being clear about the role of the professional what he/she can and cannot do.
- whether the new information with regard to the parent/carer is such that the child is considered to be at significant risk of harm or immediate danger then action must be taken without delay to ensure the child's safety.
- staff safety issues including whether it is considered safe for one worker to visit or whether contact should only take place at work premises.

A plan of intervention will be developed, the prime consideration of which will be the needs and protection of the child.

It is likely in such cases that social work will be the lead agency because of the child protection concerns. However if this is not the case a lead professional from another agency must be identified. All agencies involved will identify a key professional who will work in partnership with the lead professional.

The plan will be subject to regular inter-agency liaison and review.

General

Supervision

It is the responsibility of professionals – managers and practitioners – to make effective use of supervision within the framework of individual agency procedure and guidance. Practitioners have a professional accountability to identify families where the behaviour of parents or carers is impacting on a child's safety and to share that information with their line manager. Managers have a responsibility to exercise clear decision making.

Managers and practitioners should contribute to creating a safe environment in the workplace within which fears and anxieties about working with challenging parents/carers can be shared openly.

In the absence of formal supervision systems, advice should be sought from colleagues with experience in child protection; this may be within the same agency or another agency with key responsibilities in child protection.


Regular and Clear Inter-agency Communication

While there is presumption of openness with parents/carers, some situations may require a meeting of professionals involved without the parents/carers present. This will allow professionals to discuss the impact of the parents/carers behaviour on the child protection or child care plan, on the ability of the professionals involved to engage and effect change and on inter-agency working.

Core Groups and / or Child Protection Conferences

When a child is subject to child protection registration and new information is highlighted with regard to concerns in respect of the behaviour of parents/carers, consideration must always be given to bringing forward meetings to ensure there is full information sharing and shared understanding of the impact of the parents/carers' behaviour on the child protection plan.





If a core group is convened it must consider whether to bring forward the next review case conference, if significant changes are required to the child protection plan.

All workers involved with the family have a responsibility to share any new information about the parents/carers with the lead professional at the earliest opportunity and not wait until the next core group or review conference.

Staff Training

The Child Protection Committee should ensure that relevant multi-agency training for managers and practitioners in dealing with difficult/dangerous situations in child protection is available.

Case Management

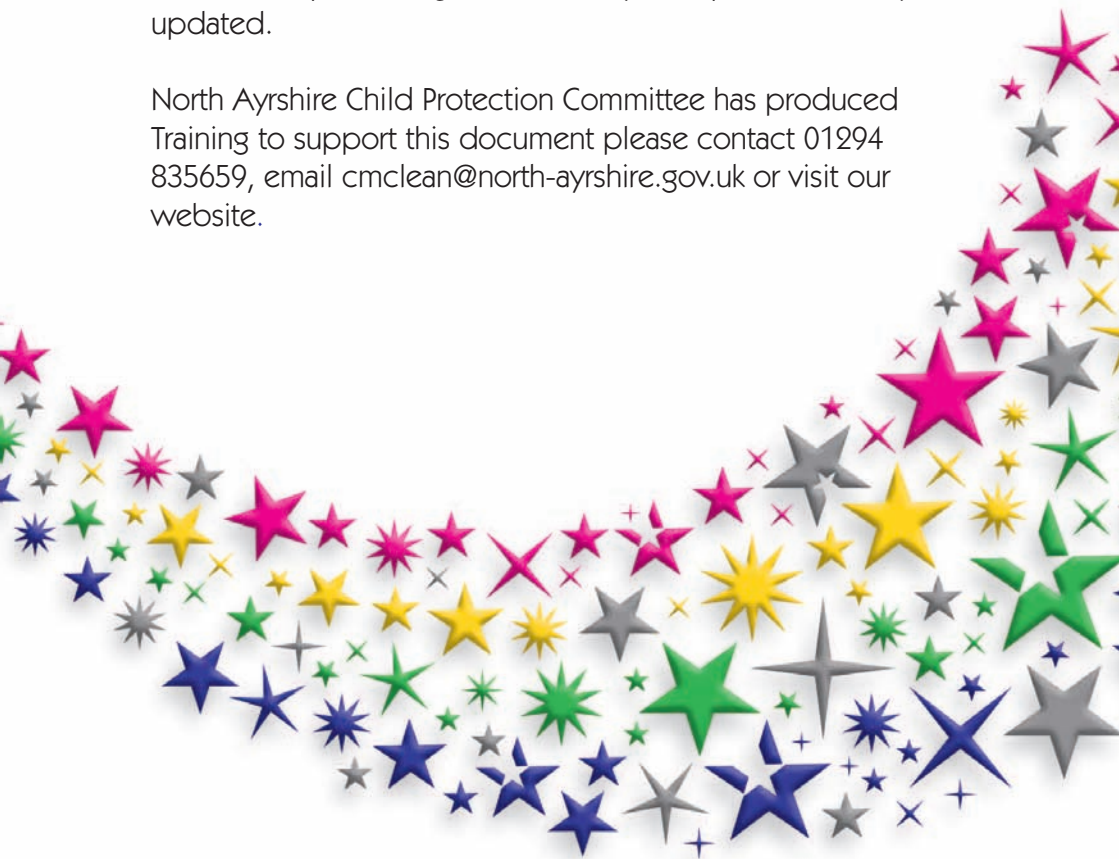
Professionals must work within individual agency and inter-agency procedures in terms of assessment and case management, recording and reflective practice, and sharing information.

Agencies must work collectively to ensure that the welfare of the child is paramount with clear lines of communication and joint working where appropriate. This should include joint visits – to promote inter-agency working, to assist in the process of assessment and to use the skills of colleagues from within and across agencies.

Agencies should have in place day to day procedures which support the safety of staff undertaking home visits. This may include the provision of mobile phones and 'logging in and out' procedures, which should include expected return time.

Where there are known concerns about challenging behaviour in parents/carers, this information should be appropriately accessible to all staff, including those working in administrative positions such as front desk receptionists. Alert mechanisms, including those on IT systems, should be kept updated.

North Ayrshire Child Protection Committee has produced Training to support this document please contact 01294 835659, email cmclean@north-ayrshire.gov.uk or visit our website.





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